SLOW SMOKE

by

LEW SARETT



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In Memoriam



LEW SARETT

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SLOW SMOKE

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SLOW SMOKE

BY

LEW SARETT

Author of
"Many, Many Moons," "The Box of God," Etc.



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To
My Son
L. S., Jr.

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L. S.



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TIMBER-LINE

Glacier National Park
Kintla Mountains
Kootenai Valley
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Montana

TO A WILD GOOSE OVER DECOYS

O LONELY trumpeter, coasting down the sky,
Like a winter leaf blown from the bur-oak tree
By whipping winds, and flapping silverly
Against the sun,—I know your lonely cry.

I know the worn wild heart that bends your flight
And circles you above this beckoning lake,
Eager of neck, to find the honking drake
Who speaks of reedy refuge for the night.

I know the sudden rapture that you fling
In answer to our friendly gander's call—
Halloo! Beware decoys!—or you will fall
With a silver bullet whistling in your wing!

Beat on your weary flight across the blue!
Beware, O traveller, of our gabbling geese!
Beware this weedy counterfeit of peace!—
Oh, I was once a passing bird like you.

FOUR LITTLE FOXES

Speak gently, Spring, and make no sudden
sound;
For in my windy valley, yesterday I found
New-born foxes squirming on the ground—
Speak gently.

Walk softly, March, forbear the bitter blow;
Her feet within a trap, her blood upon the snow,
The four little foxes saw their mother go—
Walk softly.

Go lightly, Spring, oh, give them no alarm;
When I covered them with boughs to shelter them
from harm,
The thin blue foxes suckled at my arm—
Go lightly.

Step softly, March, with your rampant hurricane;
Nuzzling one another, and whimpering with pain,
The new little foxes are shivering in the rain—
Step softly.

HANG ME AMONG YOUR WINDS

HANG me among your winds, O God,
Above the tremulous stars,
Like a harp of quivering silver strings,
Showering, as it swings,
Its tuneful bars
Of eerie music on the earth.

Play over me, God,
Your cosmic melodies:
The gusty overture for Spring's
Caprice and wayward April's mirth;
The sensuous serenade
Of summer, languid in the alder glade;
The wistful symphonies
Of Autumn; and Winter's rhapsodies
Among the drifted dunes—
Her lullabies and her torrential tunes
Moody with wild cadenzas, with fitful stress
And poignant soundlessness.

Touch me, O God, with but a gesture—
And let each finger sweep
Over my strings until they leap
With life, and rain
Their silver chimes upon the plain,
In harmonies of far celestial spaces,
Of high and holy places.

TO A GROVE OF SILVER BIRCHES

Good morning, lovely ladies! I've never seen
You half so fair,—I swear;
How beautiful your gowns of apple-green!
And the ribbons in your hair!

What rapture do you await? What coming swain?
Such rustling of petticoats!
Such wagging of heads and prinking in the rain!
Such fluttering at your throats!

Dear winsome vestals, your flurry is no whim.
I know your sly design;
And why the sap goes pulsing up each limb
Sparkling as apple wine.

O ladies, trick you in your gala-best;
For out of the ardent South,
Young April comes with a passion in his breast,
And a kiss upon his mouth.

FEUD

Poor wayworn creature! O sorely harried deer,
What drove you, quivering like a poplar-blade,
To refuge with my herd? What holds you here
Within my meadow, broken and afraid?

Tilting your nose to tainted air, you thrill
And freeze to wailing wolves! Fear you the sound
Of the coyotes eager for a tender kill?
Or yet the baying of the hunter's hound?

Let fall your anguish, harried one, and rest;
Bed yourself down among your kin, my cattle;
Sleep unperturbed, no spoiler shall molest
You here this night, for I shall wage your battle.

There was a day when coyotes in a pack,
Wolves of another hue, another breed,
With Christ upon their lips, set out to track
Me down and drop me, for my blood, my creed.

O hunted creature, once I knew the thud
Of padded feet that put you into flight,
The bugle-cry, suffused with lust for blood,
That trembled in the brazen bell of night.

I knew your frenzied rocky run, the burst
Of lungs, the rivers of fire in every vein;
I knew your foaming lip, your boundless thirst,
The rain of molten-hammering in your brain.

Bide with me then, against the wolves' return,
For I shall carry on the feud for you;
And it shall be, to me, of small concern
If the wolf-hearts walk on four soft feet or two.

Oh, let them come! And I shall burn their
flanks
With a blast of hell to end their revelry,
And whistle molten silver through their ranks,
Laughing—one round for you and one for me.

FRAIL BEAUTY

O MOLTEN dewdrop, trembling in the light
Of dawn, and clinging to the brookmint-blade—
A pendent opal on a breast of jade—
How came your splendor, so limpid and so bright?
How your clear symmetry? And what weird sleight
Of art suffused you with each rainbow-shade,
Captured your evanescent hour, and made
A quivering soul from fire and mist and night?

Fleeting your span! Yet I shall be content
To let the Cosmic Power that built in you
Such frail wet beauty, such luster opulent,
And such immortal life as lies in dew,
Fashion the fragile moment of my soul
In what frail shape It deems a perfect whole.

LITTLE ENOUGH THERE IS OF WORTH

LITTLE enough there is of worth
On this green ball of earth:
Wind in a hemlock-tree, to shake
A cool wet music from the brake . . .
Flame in an earthen bowl
To warm a frozen soul
And cheer a heart grown chill
With solitude and ill . . .
And water in a rill,
Rimmed round with moss that drips
Upon the rock, until it fashions
A goblet for hot lips,
A cup for futile passions.

And when the high heart is broken,
The last word spoken,
And tears are many as the dew,—
The fragmentary dreams
Of beauty that the world discloses

In every woodland, these are sweet,
My bread, my wine, my meat:
October smoke that hovers on the streams
And spirals up the blue;
Clambering mountain-roses,
By tender-fingered rain unfurled;
And honey-laden bees
That nuzzle the buds of shy anemones,
And dust a golden pollen on the world.

But rarer far than these—
Than any flower-cup or pool
From which to drink one's fill
Of loveliness, a potion beaded, cool,
To fortify the will—
I hold the sanguine hue
Of dawn, when courage springs anew
And the heart is high
As the banners of the day go up the sky;
The wine of the setting sun that holds
A promise of a glad to-morrow;
The pool of moonlight that enfolds
The sable hills and hollows—
As the quivering silver cry

Of a lost lone loon
Answers the drowsy swallow's,
And faintly the echoes die—
The pool of mountain moon
In which to fling oneself and make an
end of sorrow.

WHEN THE ROUND BUDS BRIM

When April showers stain
The hills with mellow rain,
The quaking aspen tree,
So delicate, so slim,
In glittering wet festoons,
Is a lovely thing to see—
When the round buds brim
And burst their fat cocoons,
Like caterpillars, clean,
And cool, and silver-green,
Uncurling on the limb.

And lovely when September,
With magic pigment dyes
The aspen stems with wings
Of flimsy butterflies—
When the frosted leaf swings
Its gold against the sun
And dances on the bough.

But when in bleak November
The latest web is spun,
And the gold has turned to dun,—
When winds of winter call
And the bare tree answers
As the last leaves fall
Like crumpled moths,—oh, now
How sad it is to look
Upon the leaves in the brook—
So many tattered hosts,
So many haggard ghosts,
So many broken dancers.

LET ME GO DOWN TO DUST

Let me go down to dust and dreams
Gently, O Lord, with never a fear
Of death beyond the day that is done;
In such a manner as beseems
A kinsman of the wild, a son
Of stoic earth whose race is run.
Let me go down as any deer,
Who, broken by a desperate flight,
Sinks down to slumber for the night—
Dumbly serene in certitude
That it will rise again at dawn,
Buoyant, refreshed of limb, renewed,
And confident that it will thrill
To-morrow to its nuzzling fawn,
To the bugle-notes of elk upon the hill.

Let me go down to dreams and dust
Gently, O Lord, with quiet trust
And the fortitude that marks a child
Of earth, a kinsman of the wild.

Let me go down as any doe
That nods upon its ferny bed,
And, lulled to slumber by the flow
Of talking water, the muffled brawl
Of far cascading waterfall,
At last lets down its weary head
Deep in the brookmints in the glen;
And under the starry-candled sky,
With never the shadow of a sigh,
Gives its worn body back to earth again.

TAMARACK BLUE

Red Lake Reservation
Lac la Croix
Superior National Forest
Rainy River
Cross Lake,
Minnesota

TAMARACK BLUE

As any brush-wolf, driven from the hills
By winter famine, waits upon the fringe
Of a settlement for cover of the dusk,
And enters it by furtive, devious route,
Cowering among the shadows, freezing taut
With every sound,—so came the widow Blue
In winter-moons to parish Pointe aux Trembles,
Doubled to earth beneath her pack of furs,
To ply her trade, to barter at the Post.
And if she ventured near the village inn,
Baring their yellow tusks the roustabouts
Would toss a dry slow leer at her and stone
Old Tamarack numb with "Mag, the Indian
hag,"
With ribald epithet and jibe and gesture.
And when they waxed melodious with rye,
Pounding their ribs, and knew no way to free
The head of steam that hammered in their
breasts,
Save in a raucous music, they would blare:

"She wears for petticoat a gunny bag"—
Adding, with many ponderous knowing winks,
"Oh, Skinflint Blue, with a shin of flint, too."
And thus to the end they thumped their beery song
With laughter raw, big-bellied. There were days
When the Christian gentlemen of Pointe aux Trembles
Would welcome Tamarack with such fusillade
Of bilious humor that the harried squaw,
Bruised by their epithets, with swimming eyes
Intent upon the dust, seemed well-nigh gone,
Stoned to the earth; there came a stumbling hour
When I put an arm around her bag of ribs,
And felt her bosom pounding with such fear
That had I dared to place my weight of thumb
Upon her heart, I could have pressed the life
From her as from a fluttering crippled wren
Held in my hand.

Nor was the widow's perfume
Of name and reputation without reason:
Penurious, forgetful of her own
Hungering flesh, she strangled every coin

And hoarded it against some secret need;
And slattern she was,—a juiceless crone, more drab
To contemplate than venison long-cured
By the slow smoke of burning maple logs—
And quite as pungent with the wilderness.
What with the fight to draw the sap of life
From grudging soil, in sun and wind and snow,
Twenty-one years of Indian widowhood
Will parch a soul and weather any hide
To the texture of a withered russet apple:
A moon of hauling sap in the sugar-bush,
Of boiling maple-syrup; a moon for netting
Whitefish and smoking them upon the racks;
Two moons among the berries, plums, and cherries;
A moon in the cranberry bog; another moon
For harvesting the wild-rice in the ponds;
Odd days for trailing moose and jerking meat;
And then the snow—and trap-lines to be strung
Among the hills for twenty swampy miles,
For minks and martens, otters, beavers, wolves.
So steadfast was the bronzed coureuse de bois
On her yearly round—like hands upon a clock—
Given the week and weather, I could tell

As surely as the needle of a compass
Finds the magnetic pole, what grove of spruce,
What jutting rock or lonely waste of swamp
Sheltered the widow's bones at night from beat
Of rain or snow.

And when the spring thaws came,
And bread was low, and her pagan stomach lay
As flat against her spine as any trout's
After a spawning-season, there were nights
When Tamarack's ears were sensitive to silver—
Evenings when any lumberjack on drive,
Gone rampant with the solitude of winter
And hungry for affection, might persuade
The otherwise forlorn and famished widow
To join him in a moment of romance.
Oh, not without demurring did she yield—
And not without reason: otter pelts are rare,
Cranberries buy no silken petticoats,
No singing lessons—for there was Susie Blue.

Whenever Tamarack touched the world in shame
Or drudgery or barter, she had for end
The wringing of a comfort for her daughter—
As when a cactus pushes down its roots

Among the hostile sands for food and moisture,
And sends the stream and sparkle of its life
Up to a creaming blossom. None of us
In parish Pointe aux Trembles could fathom why
The outcast crucified herself for Susie.
Some said that Susie Blue was all the kin
The starveling had; and others, among the elders,
Held that the half-breed daughter carried every
Feature of Antoine Blue, who fathered her,
As clearly as a tranquil mountain-pool
Holds on its breast the overhanging sky;
And added that the pagan drab was proud
That she had crossed to the issue of her flesh
The pure white strain, the color of a Frenchman.
Whatever the reason, when the voyageur
Let out his quart of blood upon the floor
After a drunken brawl at Jock McKay's,
The widow set herself to live for Susie,
Bustling from crimson dawn to purple dusk—
And sometimes in the furtive black of night—
Hither and yon, in every wind and weather,
Scratching the mulch for morsels of the earth,
And salvaging the tender bits—a grouse
With a solitary chick. Of luxuries

Wrung from the widow's frame there was no end:
Ribbons and scarves and laces—all for Susie;
And four long years at Indian boarding-school;
A year at Fort de Bois in business-college
For higher education; and, topping all,
Three seasons spent in culture of the voice.
Oh, such a dream as stirred the widow's heart!—
A hope that put a savor in her world,
A zest for life; a dream of cities thralled
By silver music fountaining from Susie,
Cities that flashed upon the velvet night
In scrawling fire the name of Susie Blue;
A dream wherein the widow would declare
In glory, comfort, rest, her dividends
Upon the flesh put in for capital.

How clearly I recall the eventful spring
When Sue returned from her gilding at the Fort!
Old Tamarack was away—at Lac la Croix
Netting for fish—and could not come to town
To welcome her. But when the run of trout
Was at an end, she cached her nets and floats
And paddled down in time for Corpus Christi.
Some circumstance conspired to keep the two
Apart until the eucharistic feast—

Perhaps the village folk who always took
A Christian interest in Susie's morals.
But Thursday found the wistful derelict
Stiff on a bench in Mission Sacré Cœur
More taut for the high sweet moment of her life
Than quivering catgut strung upon a fiddle—
For Susie was to sing in Corpus Christi;
The pagan was about to claim her own.

I'd never seen the squaw in her Sunday-best:
Soft doeskin moccasins of corn-flower blue,
Patterned with lemon beads and lemon quills;
Checkered vermilion gown of calico
To hide her flinty shins, her thin flat hips;
An umber shawl, drawn tight about her head
And anchored at her breast by leather hands—
A dubious madonna of the pines.
Somehow the crone had burst her dull cocoon
Upon this day, was almost radiant
With loveliness, as if upon the new-born
Wings of desire she were about to leave
The earth and know the luxury of sunlight.
The apologetic eyes, the mien of one
Bludgeoned to earth by rancid drollery,
Had vanished; on her face there was the look

That glorifies a partridge once in life—
When, after endless labor, pain, and trouble
Rearing her first-born brood, she contemplates
Her young ones pattering among the leaves
On steady legs, and, clucking pridefully,
Outspreads her shining feathers to the wind.
And when the widow shot a wisp of smile
At me from underneath her umber cowl—
A smile so tremulous, so fragmentary,
And yet so shyly confident that all
The dawning world this day was exquisite,
A whisk of overture so diffident
And yet so palpitant for friendliness—
Somehow the poignant silver of it slipped
Between my ribs and touched me at the quick,
And I was moved to join her in her pew.

Oh, how her eyes, like embers in a breeze,
Flared up to life when Father Bruno led
Her daughter from the choir and Susie set
Herself to sing. Susie was beautiful,
Sullenly beautiful with sagging color:
Blue was the half-seen valley of her breast;
Her blue hair held the dusk; beneath her lids
Blue were the cryptic shadows, stealthy blue,

Skulking with wraiths that spoke of intimate,
Too intimate, communion with the night,
The languor of the moon. Beneath the glass
Of hothouse culture she had come to fruit,
A dusky grape grown redolent with wine,
A grape whose velvet-silver bloom reveals
The finger-smudge of too many dawdling thumbs.

She braced herself and tossed a cataract
Of treble notes among the mission rafters,
While Sister Mercy followed on the organ.
Something distressed me in the melody—
A hint of metal, a subtle dissonance;
Perhaps the trouble lay with Sister Mercy,
Or else the organ needful of repair.
To me there seemed a mellow spirit wanting,
As if the chambers of the half-breed's soul—
Like a fiddle-box, unseasoned by the long
Slow sun and wind, and weathered too rapidly
Beside a comfortable hothouse flame—
Lacked in the power to resonate the tone.
But the widow sat beatified, enthralled;
To her the cold flat notes were dulcet-clear,
As golden in their tones as the slow bronze
bell

That swung among the girders overhead
And echoed in the hills. And Susie sang,
Serene, oblivious of all the world—
Save in a dim far pew a florid white man
Whose glance went up her bosom to her lips
And inventoried all of Susie's charms.
Was it for him she chanted? lifted up
The tawny blue-veined marble of her arm
In casual gesture to pat a random lock?
For him she shook her perfume on the air?—
Bold as a young deer rutting in October,
Drenching its heavy musk upon the wind,
And waiting—silhouetted on the moon—
Waiting the beat of coming cloven hoofs.

When Sue dispatched her final vibrant note
In a lingering amen and came to earth,
She undulated down the aisle with swash
Of silken petticoat to greet and join
Her glorified old mother—so it seemed.
And when she came within the pagan's reach,
The widow, bright with tears, and tremulous,
Uttered a rivulet of ecstasy
As wistful as the wind in autumn boughs,
And strove to touch the hand of Sue, half stood

To welcome her. The daughter paused, uncertain,
The passing of a breath. Haunted her face;
The dear dim ghosts of wildwood yesterdays
Laid gentle hands upon the half-breed's heart,
Struggled to bring her soul to life again.
She wavered. Then conscious of the battery
Of parish eyes upon her, the village code
Rich with taboos of blue and flinty flesh,
And mindful of the gulf between the two,
Sprung from her Christian culture at the Fort,
She gathered up her new-born pride, and froze.
With eyes as cold and stony as a pike's
She looked at Tamarack—as on a vagrant wind;
With but the tremor of a lip, a fleeting
Hail and farewell, she slipped her flaccid palm
From out the pagan's gnarled and weathered hand
And rustled down the room and out the door,
The stranger at her heels—a coyote warm
And drooling on the trail of musky deer.

The widow held her posture, breathless, stunned;
Swayed for a moment, blindly groped her way,
And wilted to the bench—as when a mallard,

High on a lift of buoyant homing wind,
Before a blast of whistling lead, careers,
Hovers bewildered, and, crumpling up its wings,
Plummets to earth, to lie upon the dust
A bleeding thing suffused with anguish, broken.
At last she gathered the remnants of her
strength;
Huddling within her corner, stoic, cold,
And burying her head within her cowl,
She parried all the gimlet eyes that strove
To penetrate the shadows to her mood.
And when the curé lifted up his hands
And blessed his flock, the derelict went shuffling
Along the aisle and vanished in the mist
Of Lac la Croix.

Some untoward circumstance
Stifled my breath—perhaps the atmosphere,
The fetid body-odors in the room.
I hurried from the hall to sun-washed air.
Bridling my sorrel mare, I found the trail
That skirts the mossy banks of Stonybrook,
And cantered homeward to all the kindred-folk
That ever wait my coming with high heart:
My setter bitch asprawl beside the door,

Drowsy, at peace with all the droning flies;
The woodchucks, quizzical and palpitant,
That venture from their den among the logs
To query me for crumbs; the crippled doe,
Who, lodging with me, crops my meadow-grass
And tramples havoc in my bed of beets,
Gloriously confident that I shall never
Muster the will to serve her with a notice!—
To all that blessed vagrom company
With whom I band myself against the world
And all its high concerns and tribulations.

Somehow the valley was uncommonly
Serene and lovely, following the rain,
The mellow benediction of the sun.
The beaver-ponds that held upon their glass
The clean clear blue of noon, the pebbly brook
Meandering its twisted silver rope
Through hemlock arches, loitering in pools
Clear-hued as brimming morning-glories, placid,
Save when a trout would put a slow round kiss
Upon the water—these were beautiful.
The rustle of winds among the aspen-trees,
The fragrance on the air when my sorrel mount,
Loping upon the trail, flung down her hoofs

Upon the wintergreen and left it bruised
And dripping—these were very clean and cool.
And I was glad for the wild plums crimsoning
Among the leaves, and for the frail blue millers
Glinting above them—chips of a splintered sky;
Glad for the blossoming alfalfa fields
Robust with wining sap, and the asters bobbing
And chuckling at the whimsies of the breeze;
Glad for the far jang-jangling cattle-bells
That intimated a land of deep wet grass
And lazy water, a world of no distress,
No pain, no sorrow, a valley of contentment.

Until I came upon a mullein stalk,
Withered and bended almost to the ground
Beneath the weight of a raucous purple grackle,
A weed so scrawny of twig, so gnarled, so old,
That when I flung a pebble at the bird
Heavy upon the bough, the mullein failed
To spring its ragged blades from earth again—
The suppleness of life had gone from it;
Something in this distressed me, haunted me.
Something in mullein, stricken, drooping,
doomed—
When I can hear the rustle of a ghost

Upon November wind, a ghost that whispers
Of chill white nights and brittle stars to come,
Of solitude with never a creature sounding,
Save lowing moose, bewildered by the snow,
Forlornly rumped against the howling wind—
Something in palsied mullein troubles me.

CACTUS

Gallatin Range
Madison Basin
Beaverhead Forest
Jackson's Hole
Madison Valley,
Montana

THE SHEEPHERDER

Loping along on the day's patrol,
I came on a herder in Jackson's Hole;
Furtive of manner, blazing of eye,
He never looked up when I rode by;
But counting his fingers, fiercely intent,
Around and around his herd he went:

One sheep, two sheep, three sheep, four . . .
Twenty and thirty . . . forty more;
Strayed—nine ewes; killed—ten rams;
Seven and seventy lost little lambs.

He was the only soul I could see
On the lonely range for company—
Save one lean wolf and a prairie-dog,
And a myriad of ants at the foot of a log;
So I sat the herder down on a clod—
But his eyes went counting the ants in the sod:

One sheep, two sheep, three sheep, four . . .
Fifty and sixty . . . seventy more;
There's not in this flock a good bell-wether!
Then how can a herder hold it together!

Seeking to cheer him in his plight,
I flung my blankets down for the night;
But he wouldn't talk as we sat by the fire—
Coralling sheep was his sole desire;
With fingers that pointed near and far,
Mumbling, he herded star by star:

One sheep, two sheep, three—as before!
Eighty and ninety . . . a thousand more!
My lost little lambs—one thousand seven!—
Are wandering over the hills of Heaven.

BREAKERS OF BRONCOS

So! breakers of broncos! with miles of jagged
wire,
You seek to break the spirit of this range;
With lariat of barbed wire fence, you hope
To tame its heart, and with your iron heel,
Hot from the desert, to sear upon its hip
Your molten brand—as wranglers at a round-up,
With bit and spur and lasso, strive to curb
And brand an outlaw fresh from winter range.

O breakers of broncos, listen! Can't you hear
The northwind snickering at you? the coyote
Upon the mesa, jeering? the waterfall
Chuckling among the rocks? the croaking magpie,
The hooting owl, the crane, the curlew? Look!
The chokecherry blossom, the sage, the bitter-
root,
Bending with mirth, wag their heads, and laugh
At you! Why, even the broomtail cayuse kicks
His heels against the mountain sky, and snorts!

O breakers of broncos, we fling you on the wind
This handful of dust, this bitter alkali!—
As well attempt to rope the bucking stars,
Or burn your bars upon the flank of the moon!
When will you whirl your lasso at the sun?
Or bridle it? Or straddle the lightning-flash?

COLLOQUY WITH A COYOTE

Ki-yoo-oo-oo-oo-oo-oo!

Speak now, O coyote, rumped upon the knoll!
Into the bowl of desert night—
Clinking and cool with stars—oh, roll
The melancholy of your soul.
When sentimental with the moon, you cry
Your longing to the lady in the sky,
Know that you do not grieve for her, alone,
That your deep yearning, sprung from blight
Of solitude, is tallied by my own.
Speak then, O coyote, speak for me;
With your seductive melody cajole
The lovely one to be more intimate, invite
Her to linger for a moment of delight.
The virgin, you, and I—we three
On such a night should be more neighborly.

In the homeland whence I came, a solitude
Dark with its regiments of lancing pine
That march from peak to water-line,

I knew another spokesman for my mood—
Oh, he was suave, ingratiating, shrewd!
When balsams muffled their voices in the cowl
Of sable dusk, and tranquil, cool,
The beaver-pond was but a chip
Of silver, soundless, save for the flip
Of a beaver's tail, the flapping of an owl—
On such a night as this,
When the silver-lady put a kiss
Upon the bosom of the pool,
The gibbering loon, disconsolate, forlorn,
Flinging upon the sky a rain
Of silver tones, the tremolo of pain—
Would always gain her ear and mourn
For me, befriend me; ah, the loon
And I!—we had an understanding with the moon.

Speak then, O desert coyote, speak for me now.
Be to me kinsman in this valley of the dead,
This waste so unfamiliar, so dispirited.
Among the buffalo-skulls upon the brow
Of yonder butte, fling back your head,
And stabbing moonward with your wail, impart
Our sorrow till it breaks the vestal's heart;
Tell the indifferent one that she is beautiful,

As lovely and as cool
As a peeled willow bough;
Request the lady to leave off her gown
Of clouds, and ask her to come down . . .

Ki-yoo-oo-oo-oo-oo-oo!

DYNAMITE

Outlaw they brand you, killer, bucking fool,
Because you spurn the hackamore and cinch;
The round-up wranglers wait with eager heart
The moment of your fall: your steel-curbed mouth
Running a rill of blood, your back worn raw
By saddle sticking like a cocklebur,
Your wild heart, broken by the quirt, subdued.

O bronco, whose will is set against the will
Of the multitude, as taut as any bowstring,
Know that another outcast will exult
If the free-born one shall pitch the sovereign many
Over the rim of sky and into darkness. . . .

Beware!—the burlap that they strive to fling
About your head to blind you! the velvet hands
They clamp upon your ears, your quivering mouth!

Or you will run the range to-morrow servile,
Shattered of soul as any mongrel cur.

Beware! They come! Let fly your molten
heels!
Double and snort and twist! Rain down your
hoofs
Of crackling thunderbolts upon the ground!
For every sweep of spur from neck to flank,
Hurtle your rider skyward, rake his head
Upon the pointed stars, and heave him sprawling
Over the moon and down to earth again.

Oh, beautiful!—the wild heart pounding, free!
The flames of hell triumphant in your eyes!
As lovely your electric flesh careering,
As galloping cloud and lightning-flash, your kin,
The wild unfettered horses of the sky.

Well done! Well done! O bronco, run! Run!
Streaming the velvet banners of your mane,
Run free again; back to the comradeship
Of cantering rain and nickering waterfalls,
To your mountain solitude where thin blue winds
Whinny among the pines and crop the grasses.
And wait for me, O bronco, wait for me there.

BLACKTAIL DEER

The blacktail held his tawny marble pose,
With every supple muscle set to spring,
Nosing the tainted air—his slender limbs
And sinews like corded copper quivering.

Ponderous the minutes, while his smoldering eyes
Went burning over me, and searching mine;
His heart ticked off each moment as he stood
Waiting an ominous word, a sound, a sign.

I tossed a friendly gesture! The sinews snapped
And flung his bulk of rippled tawny stone
Over an alder, as when a bended pine,
Released from pressure, catapults a cone.

Bending an arch above the alder-crown,
In a stream of whistling wind the great buck went,
Flirting his tail in exclamation marks
To punctuate his vast astonishment.

ALTYN

Altyn, the world's most wicked city, Altyn—
All the old wranglers who jingled in the days
Of open range, and all the Vigilantes,
Cupping their palsied hands behind their ears,
Still shift reflective cuds and wag their heads
Whenever barroom talk swings around to Altyn,
The world's most wicked city.

Oh, sinful enough
It was when Silver Britt, of Kootenai,
Staked out his claim in Blackfoot Basin, sank
His mattock into a seam of golden luck,
And opened the Yellow Mary; when all the gates
Of hell went out and poured upon the town
A flood of rustlers, mountebanks, and harpies—
As when a logging-dam, with a mighty groan
Gives way and looses on a tranquil valley
A pent up avalanche of rotting weeds
And slithering débris.

In a turbulent tide,
From every stagnant bayou of the earth
They tumbled; outlaws, renegades, and boomers,
Rakehells and courtezans and roustabouts—
The scum of every region—over the hills
They streamed, and eddied in the town of Altyn:
Alkali Brown, who ran the faro-bank
And left the miners stripped of every nugget,
With pokes as empty as a beggar's cup
Would be upon the reeling streets of Altyn;
And Kansas Kitty, vast, oleaginous,
Who amorously engulfed her maudlin guests
With ardor more fierce than Arizona noon—
The while, subtle of touch, five crooked fingers
Slipped through the sliding panel in the wall
And filched their dangling pockets; Jules Boidreau,
The Dude of Kootenai, who conjured gold-dust
Out of the money-belts of all the cruisers,
With deft white hands and the subtle abracadabra
Of walnut shells and temperamental peas.

Oh, never the tremble of a gentle tear
In the world's most wicked city; never a man

Whose heart would yield the flower of compassion.
Not even Gentleman Joe, who worked his spells
With fan-tan, chuc-a-luck, and three-card monte,
Suave as the blade of any butter-knife;
Nor even Effie Golden—she of the eyes
As wistful as a mating antelope's—
She of the lips suffused with all the warmth
Of scarlet poppies after rain—Effie,
Nobody's woman, the woman of every man—
Effie, who coiled her undulating white
Of arms about young Calvin McElroy,
Who dubbed himself a circuit-riding parson—
Effie, who breathed a passion on his mouth
That melted his will as a blow-torch melts a candle—
Effie, who poured the poison of her blood
Into his veins, and flung him out in the pink
Of morning, to stagger to his hut, shattered,
Blighted, as when a sound white apple takes
The worm from a rotten apple at its side.

Oh, desert winds fling handfuls of alkali
And dust upon the moldering bones of Altyn;
The face of Yellow Mary Mountain, pocked

By a thousand mattocks, robbed of its golden
teeth,
Looks down with a crooked smile and leers at
Altyn;
When hollow moon is hooked among the pines,
The lobo, squat on a carcass, lifts his head
And quavers a melancholy requiem—
Where clanking skeletons of mining-rig
And darkly looming winch are silhouetted
Against the moon, like gibbets dangling the
ghosts
Of once high dreams of Altyn.

Nothing remains
Of the world's most wicked city; nothing remains,
Except a solitary grave that rambles
With clematis, and mallows salmon-red,
Planted by McElroy's fast-rotting fingers,
Patterned about by skulls of buffalos—
Dark-socketed tenements of drowsy bees
And darting centipedes; and girdling the mound,
Like a bulwark against the world, a wall of stone,
Painfully quarried, painfully hewn, and lifted
Painfully into place by bleeding hands;
And on the hillock, within this miniature

God's Acre, a weary weathered shingle leaning
Upon the wind, and deeply carved by hands
Palsied with fever: *Effie Golden—gone.*
Oh, nothing remains, nothing remains of Altyn,
Where never the eye of any man had known
The glint and tremble of a gentle tear;
Where never the stony furrows of a heart
Had yielded up the flower of compassion.

VERMILION

Blackfeet Reservation
Shoshone National Forest
Red Lake Reservation
Absaroka Range
Thumb Ranger Station,
Wyoming

INDIAN LOVE SONG

Cold sky and frozen star
That look upon me from afar
  Know my echoed grief.

Hollow night and black butte
Hear my melancholy flute—
  Oh, sound of falling leaf.

Homeless wind and waterfall
Hold a sadness in their call,
  A sorrow I have known.

Shivering wolf and lonely loon
Cry my sorrow to the moon—
  O heavy heart . . . O stone!

WEENG

An Indian Slumber-song

HUSH! my baby, or soon you will hear
The Sleepy-eye, Wéeng-oosh, hovering near;
Out of the timber he will come,
A little round man as small as your thumb.
Swinging his torch of a red fire-fly,
Out of the shadows old Sleepy-eye,
With sound of a ghost, on the wind will creep
To see if a little boy lies asleep;
Over your cheeks old Weeng will go,
With feet as soft as the falling snow—
Tip-toe . . . . . tip-toe.

Hush! my little one, close your lids tight,
Before old Sleepy-eye comes to-night;
Hi-yáh! if he finds you are still awake,
He draws from his quiver a thistledown stake;
With an acorn for club he pounds on its butt,
Till Sleepy-eye hammers the open eye shut;

Then from his bundle he pulls out another,
Hops over your nose and closes the other;
Up and down with his club he will rap
On the open lid till he closes the gap—
Tap-tap . . . . . tap-tap.

If Wéeng-oosh comes at the end of this day,
And finds you asleep he will hurry away . . .
Do you hear him cry on the winds that blow?—
And walk on the earth as soft as a doe?—
To-and-fro . . . . . to-and-fro . . .
Hi-yáh! he has crept away from my lap!
For he found my little boy taking a nap.
Oh, weep no more and whisper low,
I hear the feet of Sleepy-eye go—
Tip-toe . . . . . tip-toe.

CRAZY-MEDICINE

If an Indian seeks revenge on an enemy, he may select an incantation known as crazy-medicine. He will carve a cedar image of his foe as large as a man's finger, and on a string suspend it from an arched willow switch so that the image spins in the wind. Touching its head with vermilion medicine-paint, he will address it as if it were his enemy in the flesh. The poem expresses the mood of the incantation.

Blow winds, winds blow,
North, East, South, West,
Make my foe, the cedar man,
Drunk with crazy dances;
Shake his skull until his brains
Rattle up and rattle down—
Pebbles in a gourd.

Roar winds, winds roar,
Flapping winds, jumping winds,
Winds that crush and winds that split,
Winds like copper lances;
Whistle through the crazy man,
Fling him up, fling him down—
A rag upon a cord.

Beat winds, winds beat,
Iron winds, icy winds,
Winds with hail like leaden shot
That make a sounding thunder;
Beat a sleet upon his head,
Up and down, up and down—
Hail upon a drum.

Wail winds, winds wail,
Silver winds, pointed winds,
Winds to stab a coyote soul,
In and out and under;
Send cold silver through his head,
In an ear, out an ear—
A needle through a plum.

CHANT FOR THE MOON-OF-FLOWERS

On the sacred flame, O Mighty Mystery,
I fling my handful of good red-willow bark;
Like willow smoke that floats upon the dusk,
My prayer goes winding up the sky to you:

In the Moon-of-Strawberries-and-Raspberries
Stain the green world, O Maker-of-all-good-
things,
With a bursting yield of berries; let them hang
Plenty upon the bush, and heavy with blood.
Let the trout and whitefish walk into my nets
Thick as the stars that swim across the sky;
And may the big-knives offer plenty silver
For every catch of fish; ho! let the price
Of fat young pike and trout be seven coppers
No longer—eight is good, and nine is better.
Not for myself I ask all this,
But for my little boy, Red-Owl,
For he is good.

In the Moon-of-Blueberries ask our mother earth
To let the sap go up her stalks of corn
In sparkling currents; make the huckleberries
So plentiful that when we shake the twigs
Above the mó-kuk, the sagging fruit will patter
Down on the birchbark bucket—round blue rain;
Make the wild hay deep among the meadows,
More soft and deep than winter-fur of beaver,
So thick the northwind cannot part the grasses.
Not for myself I ask these presents,
But for my daughter, Little-Bee,
For she is good.

In the Moon-of-Changing-Color-of-the-Leaves
Ripen the wild-rice growing in the marshes,
Until the yellow grains are full of milk,
Ripe for the world, like heavy-breasted women;
In the wet mush-kéegs, make cranberries plentiful,
Thick as the dots that mark the spotted trout;
And may the goose-plums on the tree be many,
So full of clear red honey that they burst
Their skins and spatter sweet upon the earth.
Not for myself I ask these gifts,

But for my woman, Yellow-Wing,
For she is good.

Ho! Mystery, I fling upon the fire
My handful of willow bark to make you glad;
Open your hands and toss me many presents
Showering on the earth like falling leaves.

SPOTTED-FACE, THE TRIBAL FOOL, PRAYS

O Mystery, take my feast of maple-sugar
Set on this medicine-earth for you to eat—
And let your heart grow good to me with presents.

Give me the legs and sinews of the moose,
For trailing otters steadily from sleep
To sleep; the cunning of the timber-wolf,
That I may kill prime fishers, minks, and martens;
And put upon the pan of my trap the paws
Of silver foxes, and let its ragged teeth
Hold to the bone with the never-ending clutch
Of quicksand—ho! many foxes—eleven, twelve!

All this I ask, that I may pack much fur
To the village—pelts to the muzzle of my gun,
Pelts that will put white eyes in the heads of all
The pretty-colored women, bold round eyes
That burn my spotted face with naked asking.

Put in my hands your devil-magic herbs:
A medicine to kill Blue-Whooping-Crane,
Whose pretty talk, like tongue of rattlesnake,
Tickled my woman until she bared her breast
To it and took his poison in her blood;
A medicine to wither and rot the legs
Of Pierre La Plante, who took her to his lodge,
And ran with her to parish Trois Pistoles.

Give me an herb to lock the jaws of women
Tight as a rusty trap, to freeze the lips
Of the dry old women of my tribe who speak
My name with mouths that flow with dirty
laughter.

Fix me a woman, a woman who will hold
Herself for me alone, as the trumpeter-swan
That waits through lonely silver nights for wings
That whistle down the wind like an old song.

Ho! Mighty-Spirit, let your heart grow good
To me with presents; so much I ask—no more.

SPLIT ROCK

Yellowstone Park
Eagle Butte
Shoshone River
Lamar Valley
Sylvan Pass Ranger Station,
Wyoming

REQUIEM FOR A MODERN CRŒSUS

To him the moon was a silver dollar, spun
Into the sky by some mysterious hand; the sun
Was a gleaming golden coin—
His to purloin;
The freshly minted stars were dimes of delight
Flung out upon the counter of the night.

In yonder room he lies,
With pennies on his eyes.

BLACK OMEN

Out of the slanting dusk it came—
The thought too sinister for words;
With wings that flapped against the moon
More darkly swift than any bird's.

As a bat all night above a pond
Shadows the mirrored firmament,
It flecked my tranquil pool of dreams;
And like a bat at dawn it went.

WORDS

He never flinched, and never a muscle stirred;
Speechless he stood beneath the stinging whips
She laid upon him in each syllable
That crackled from her lips.

Yet in his heart a river of anger rolled,
And swept his words into a groaning jam,
As when a torrent chokes a rushing stream
With logs across a dam.

But when she flung at him the dynamite
Of epithet and insinuating doubt,
With a mighty moan the pent up tide gave way,
And the jam of words went out:

Words cut by a madman's ax; words brittle with ice;
Words pointed, barbed with sleet and torn of branch;
Words that cascaded, ricocheted, and split,
Fell in an avalanche.

Down with the flood of wrath they pitched and
plunged,
Until at last there came the utter peace
That settles on a stream when logs go out,
And flood-tides find release.

DEEP WET MOSS

Deep wet moss and cool blue shadows
Beneath a bending fir,
And the purple solitude of mountain,
When only the dark owls stir—
Oh, there will come a day, a twilight,
When I shall sink to rest
In deep wet moss and cool blue shadows
Upon a mountain's breast,
And yield a body torn with passions,
And bruised with earthly scars,
To the cool oblivion of evening,
Of solitude and stars.

KOOTENAI POOL

Like clear green wine, the water in the pool,
In a bowl of quartz as pink as salmon-eggs;
And deep in the apple-green, a shimmering school
Of trout, like shifting silver dregs.

TRAILING ARBUTUS

I FOUND a wild arbutus in the dell,
The first-born blossom from the womb of Spring;
The bud, unfurling, held me in a spell
With its hesitant awakening.

Fragrant its petals, pink and undefiled
As the palm of one new-born, or its finger-tips;
Delicate as the song of a little child,
And sweet as the breath between its lips.

Something in shy arbutus wet with dew
Lays hold of me, something I do not know,—
Unless—among these blossoms once I knew
A little boy, oh, long ago.

THE LAMPS OF BRACKEN-TOWN

Beneath a canopy of ferns
The frosted berries hung;
Like lanterns on a slender arm,
Their blazing crimson swung—
Lanterns to rout the brooding dark,
To blaze the way of crickets
Adventuring down the gloomy streets
Beneath the bracken-thickets.

CASCADES OF GROS VENTRES

Over the rim of the glacier,
Down dusk of the canyon-wall,
Like a river of sliding moonlight,
Tumbled the waterfall.

The stream of torrential moonlight
Cascaded down the blue,
Into a pool of moonlight
Among the sable yew.

Hovering above the eddies,
The fragile-pinioned foam,
Like swarms of silver millers,
Went fluttering up the gloam;

Only to perish, broken,
Shattered upon a gust
By the ponderous white of moonlight
Into a silver dust.

GHOST

THERE is a ghost in winter wind;
  But nobody can hear it cry,
Save him who bruises wantonly
A thrush, a rose, a willow-tree,
  Or breaks a butterfly.

READERS OF LOAM

Wet loam below a mountain waterfall
Is like a tattered page from out a book,
Rich with high tales of passing mountain
folk . . .

Look! in the silt that rims the pool and holds
The milky flood in a black cup of onyx—
Here! in the broken ferns, a crippled elk
Tarried a moment in his flight, to drink,
To nibble at the birch; and on his heels,
Flinging from lustful tongues a foam, flecked red
As any livid toadstool, came coyotes! four! . . .

Here! where the rill meanders a silver yarn
Among the brackens, looping their broken jade,
Ptarmigan stepped like solemn wooden soldiers,
A mother and her palpitating brood.
Spearing a globe of crystal water, each
Soberly rolled it down his gullet, blinked
A crimson lid, and pecked at the dryad's pol-
len. . . .

And where the chokecherry blossoms drip a fragrance
Upon the air, a grizzly bear came shuffling.
Here, in the patch of adder's-tongue, he clawed
The earth for succulence; there he sniffed,
And tunneled to a nest of meadow-mice;
Yonder he sprawled upon the bank, to drink,
To paw the honey-bees, to contemplate
The blue-finned grayling gliding in the pool. . . .

Oh, there will come a day, when some sharp eye
Will fall upon this range, and mark this pool,
When some keen reader of the great green Book
Will come on footprints in the Loam and say:

Out of a land of alkali and sage-brush,
Fevered of lip, he staggered to these hills,
Pursued by desert wolves who had no spine
To snarl their jaws at him, save in a pack.
And here upon the thick wet mountain-moss
He flung himself to rest among the brookmints
Cool with the dew, to dream a little, to drink
The cold green wine of earth; and in the evening
He stood upon his legs again, refreshed.

There, in the balsam grove, he built a flame
And cedar shelter against the frost of night.
And yonder, where the jasper cliff juts out
Over a sea of combering valley pines,
Like any wolf that freezes on a butte
And spills the hunger of his solitude
Into the desert coulees, he flung his call,
And waited for a dusky mate to answer. . . .

Here, with the cunning of a cougar, he made
A wide detour, scenting a tainted air,
The strychnine in the carcass of a deer;
And there, where the junipers are trampled down
And beaded with blood, he put a careless foot
Upon a trap and felt the crunch of bone
Between sharp teeth unyielding as a badger's;
Yonder, with ugly laughter on his lips,
He set his naked hands upon the trap,
And forced its jaws to gap with bloody mirth;
And winning free, he went his way again. . . .

Here! on this lookout ridge at timber-line,
With sun cascading over him, he sprawled
Deep in the wintergreens, and sank his pain
In mellow dreams—he gave himself to beauty:

The alpine-lily whose brimming cup he tipped
Until he spilled its wine upon the grass,
The clouds that billowed up the mountainside
And washed their silver foam about his knees,
The pinewood's smoke that put a pencil-mark
Upon the horizon, spiralled up the blue,
And scrawled its lazy pungent syllables
Across the sunset—these delighted him. . . .

And here, beneath the great-armed Douglas fir,
Where stars slip by on quiet feet, and winds
Shake out a slender music from the boughs,
He mingled his body with the dust again. . . .

Step softly here! among these pulsing flowers
Rooted upon his clay. Put down no foot
Upon their petals; bruise no crimson stem.
These bloodroot blossoms are alive with him.

FIGURES IN BRONZE

Grand Portage Reservation
Flute-reed River
Lake Winnibigoshish
Lake Superior
Grand Marais,
Minnesota

RATTLING-CLAW

An Indian Spinster

For thirty Moons-of-Flowers-and-Grass she
waited,
Waited for something, something that never
came.
When she was but a fingerling, she took
A buckskin pack upon her shoulder-blades;
And from the cranberry swamps of Val Brillant
She slogged upon the devious snow-shoe trail
Of Two-Guns-Calf, her sire, and followed him
To Goat-haunt Range, to mountain solitude.

Ninety-four miles from kin and village folk
They lived in isolation, year on year,
Running their otter trap-lines in the hills,
Harvesting rice and roots and saskatoons,
And gathering for margin of luxury
The annual yield of fruit and maple-sugar.

Here in the hostile upland, Rattling-Claw,
Groomed by the keen wind, the alpine sun,
Waxed opulent with beauty; in maidenhood
She blossomed like a lily, a crimson lily,
Wafted as seedling from a lowland swamp
To chilling solitude of timber-line,
And come, by stroke of chance, to rich ripe
fruit—
When mellow sun brought flushed maturity
To all her sisters in the far savanne.

I recollect the night I came on them.
The District Ranger, fearing forest-fires,
Had sent me out to run down flaming stubs
Struck in the pineries by lightning-flash.
A twilight caught me at the mountain lodge
Of Two-Guns-Calf; electing to break the night
With him, I picketed my mare, I flung
My blankets down and shared his food and flame.

While Two-Guns pried me gently for the news
Of Val Brillant, his daughter set the bowls
Of steaming wild-rice, the roast of venison.
And as we spoke, she lingered at my side,
Solicitous of every mood and whim,

Trembling at every touch of casual hand,
Eager to salvage from our talk a glance
Of admiration, a morsel of approval.
And warranted they were! Suffused her flesh
From clear cold winds; seductive was the curve
Of throat that palpitated with an ardor
Sprung from a wild sweet earth; the dusky eyes,
Low-lidded with a shy slow invitation—
A crimson lily ripe for seed, and waiting,
Waiting for pollen-bearing winds to come
From out a far low country, a humming-bird,
A butterfly, a roving bumblebee.

And later, when we left old Two-Guns nodding
Beside the fire, and ventured down the trail
To Heron Spring, to fill our birch-bark buckets—
Vivid the memory: the stoic firs,
The lichen-covered ridge, the pool of sky
Quivering with silver fish, the eager pupil
Close by my side the while my finger sketched
On night the constellations, star by star,
The Northern Crown, the Bear, the Flying
Swan—
Too few they were! And when a timber-wolf
Shivered the solitude with eerie wails

That drove her to my arms in playful fright:
The rounded warmth of her, the yielding flesh,
The moist vermilion of her mouth that brushed
By chance against my cheek—oh! it would test
The iron in the will of any man
To hold secure its chill integrity
Against the surging fire of Rattling-Claw;
Either it yielded, molten, soon or late,
Or else was purified to tempered steel. . . .

In Goat-haunt Range, old Rattling-Claw, alone,
Flings out the line of traps, draws up alone
Her buckets at the spring, and sets the roast
Of venison before her palsied sire;
In Goat-haunt isolation, Rattling-Claw,
Wasted by years, by hungers unfulfilled,
Companioned by a hound on whom she rains
Her ardor, lets fall her virtues one by one
To earth like petals withered—a lily, parched
In the Moon-of-Turning-Colors-in-the-Leaves,
Raspy of blade, forlornly wilted, waiting,
Waiting for pollen-bearing winds to come
From out a far low country, a venturing moth,
A roving bee, a bird, a butterfly.

THE MISCREANT, ANGEL

To L. S., Jr.

Angel Cadotte was mischievous, more roguish
Than any chipmunk in a bin of oats.
But when the daily storm of wrath would break
After a prank upon the priest or teacher,
And justice—in the form of Michael Horse,
The reservation policeman—sought to lay
A rod of birch across his quivering back,
Angel would scurry to my side for refuge,
And cling tenaciously upon my legs
Until the storm had passed—as any woodsman,
Buffeted, beaten by tumultuous rains,
Seeks out the shelter of a thick-boughed fir,
And flattening himself against the trunk,
Clings to the bark with fingers desperate.

Oh, it was good to be a friendly fir-tree
Shielding a wild young body from the storm;
And good to feel the frenzied clutch of hands,

The cannonading of a wild young heart.
And if, in the fancy of a luckless wildling,
You were the only fir-tree in the world
That had a lee and overhanging boughs,
What would you do? And did you ever see
A tree, offended by some childish prank,
Fold up its branches? walk away in wrath?
And leave a little boy without a shelter
Against the beat of rain? Impossible!

CAMRON

The Indian-trader

CAMRON, the trader, had a way with him,
A something in his thin white thread of lip
When bargaining with Indians he sought to beat
Them down in prices put on huckleberries,
With dubious talk of markets glutted, falling.
Niggard he was in the currency of speech.
Out of a cold white mouth his words would click
And clatter on the hardwood desk like coins;
And when he deigned to drop a word of barter,
Cold and metallic, the squaws would pick it up,
And—so to speak—would bite upon its edge
And fling it down upon a slab of stone,
Spinning and clinking, to find if it was good.

But every word he tossed them, good or specious,
The women soon or late would hold of worth;
When bellies are flat with hunger as a pike's
In spawning-season, any round glittering word,

Silver or leaden, soft between the teeth
Or brittle enough to nick a coyote's fangs—
If it but jingles faintly on a stone—
Falls on an Indian ear like silver music.

MRS. DOWN-STARS

A Widow and Her Three Daughters:
Seraphine,
Josephine,
Josette.

O WINTER wind, move gently in this wood;
Here lives a gaunt black birch, so old, so worn,
So haggard with the snows of sixty winters
That nothing remains of her save tattered dreams,
And, sheltered by her withered arms, the fruit
Of an ancient ardor long since gone to dust:
Three saplings, shimmering-clean and cherry-red,
That loop the forest floor with supple limbs.

O winter storm, though here are three young dancers
Eager to make a high wild song of winds,
To leap upon the dust of yesterday,
There is a broken dreamer in this wood

Who knows no song save mournful requiem,
No step for dancing on a snow-drift save
Macaber click of hollow yellow bones
And shuffle of ghostly feet. O January,
Shake out no moan from her, and be no urge
To her unwilling feet; oh, let her sink
Gently to earth in her good time and season,
To dreams, to dreamlessness; and cover her,
Cover her softly with your drift of snow,
As tenderly as this gaunt birch let fall
Her leaves and bedded down her saplings three
Against the coming of a cold, cold winter.

BAZILE DEAD-WIND

The Beggar

He squatted in the mud with hand outstretched,
Beetled of forehead, pocked and scrofulous,
Bulbous of scarlet nose; but with the stream
Of silver jingling in his birchen bucket,
The vagabond waxed somehow crimson-clean,
As a warty toadstool flushes into life
Beneath the benediction of cool sweet rain.

CHIEF BLOODY-FEATHER

A Council-chief

RINGED by platoons of stoic bronze, the chief
Stood up in council-grove above the rabble—
Headmen and chiefs, hunters, jugglers, braves,
The children of his loins, his children's children—
Above this host the council-speaker loomed:
An ancient maple-tree, a strong sweet tree
That has made wild music from the wind and
snow
For ninety winters; a maple-tree whose arms,
Stretching against the rain, the bouncing hail,
Has sheltered multitudes of travellers
And straggling hosts of elders, wayworn, palsied,
And weary with the day,—for ninety summers.

A maple that has yielded up its life
Season on sugar-season—oh, what can be
More tragic in its beauty than a maple:
Swollen and scarred of trunk, and varicose

From gashes in the bark, from too many wounds
Of too many spiles that let out too much sap,
From too much giving, giving for ninety years,
For ninety Moons-of-Maple-Sugar-Making,
For ninety Moons-of-Gathering-of-Wild-Rice,
For ninety Moons-of-the-Falling-of-the-Leaves,
For ninety Moons-of-the-Coming-of-the-Snow.

STILL-DAY

A Medicine-man

Mystic he was, more deep and passionless
Than a stagnant pond beneath a film of weeds;
But when the clouds went combering up the sky,
And Thunder-spirits, rumbling in the dusk,
Flickered their tongues of lightning ghastly green,
His withered lips would ripple with a prayer,
Like water-reeds before a gasp of wind.

Socketed deep among his bold bronzed features,
Worn dull from long communing with the ghosts
Of fish, of snakes, of moaning dead, his eyes
Held never a hint of evil; save in winter,
When bleak Kee-wáy-din, ghost-of-frozen-death,
Flung on a swirl of snow, from out a deep
Dark pocket of the night, a Great White Owl.
Ugh! Black-medicine! . . . beneath his lids
A stealthy soul would glint like any weasel
Gliding among the shadows in the rushes.

When Northern Lights came slipping from the
cave
Of spirits in the land-of-winter-ice,
And lifted up a spectral hand to clutch
The shuddering stars—*Hi-yáh! Dark Mystery!*
Baleful and sinister the fleeting mood
That swept across his stoic countenance,
As when a black bat darts across the moon
And throws a flapping shadow on a pool.

ANGELIQUE

Twenty-one Moons-of-Berries, and Angelique,
Nurtured to ripeness in the wild black earth
Of St. Hilaire by summer suns and rains,
Waxed like a wild goose plum upon the bough,
From brimming bud, to blossom, into fruit.
Despite the frosts that life had visited
Upon her youth—her father, mother, brothers,
all
Had vanished with the sickness-on-the-lungs—
She struggled to survival into beauty.

At twenty-two she found the will to live
In a high sweet dream of loveliness to come,
A dream of home, of a swinging cradleboard
Bearing its fretful cargo from a sea
Of trouble into the port of cool sleep;
Oh, Angelique would mother anything,
A homeless cat, a dog, a broken bird.

At twenty-three the rich maturity
Of full-blown womanhood revealed itself
In every rounded line of hip and bosom,
In every limb that pulsed with ardent wine.

Upon the tree of life she hung, in reach
Of the hand of any passing harvester—
A ripe wild plum, grown full with amber sap
As thick and clear beneath the billowy skin
As a globe of pure wild honey against the sun,
So heavy with life upon the bended twig
That any breeze might shake it from the bough.

But breezes in the parish St. Hilaire
Were few enough, and harvesters were fewer,
What with the lumberjacks away on drives
In distant logging-camps, and the voyageurs
Trading for pelts, or out on timber-cruise.
Thus Angelique remained upon the branch,
Powdered with bloom as any untouched drupe,
Until the government dentist, Gene Magruder,
Came with the crew of federal engineers.

Magruder was a connoisseur of fruit,
Truly a horticulturist of parts—
And smooth as darkly quiet water flowing
Over a beaver-dam. Oh, he was good
To contemplate, celestial in the eyes
Of guileless Angelique, when mimicking
The moods of heroes in the cinema,

He posed for her at evening in the pines,
Bathed in a purifying flood of moonlight,—
Moonlight that draped him in a spotless robe,
And put upon his pallid face the look
Of an acolyte before a glowing candle.
More beautiful he was in lonely night,
When rippling his fingers on his cedar flute,
He stirred to life within a woman's breast
A nameless poignant yearning, the wistful will
To mother something, someone—a bird, a fawn,
An acolyte before a glowing candle.
And when at last, with patch of open throat
Silverly throbbing like a mating thrush's,
He poured his torrential ardor in a song
That dripped the melancholy of his hunger—
Oh, never a thing of throbbing human flesh
Could long withstand the beat and break of it!
Never a woman but would yield a moan,
And clutching at her breast with trembling hands,
Sink down upon the earth.

So Angelique!—
As when a wild goose plum, mature for harvest,
Shaken among the leaves by a flitting thrush,
Lets loose its tenuous hold upon the twig
And drops to earth, a windfall for the world.

And if a woman, lonely, heavy with seed,
And hungry for a moment of romance,
Assured of the fulfilment of a dream
Of swinging cradleboards, and reassured
That in the Moon-of-Falling-Leaves the curé,
Father Bazile, would bind them with the banns
And sanctify their evening of delight—
If such a woman, in this circumstance,
Yield to the law of gravity, what man
Of wisdom in the ways of nature will put
His heel on her, or stone her with contempt!
So Angelique!—among the grim-lipped pines
That rim the valley of the Beaverbrook . . .
While parish St. Hilaire was dark with sleep . . .
When the hollow mocking laughter of a loon
Echoed within the silver bell of night. . . .

In the Moon-of-Falling-Leaves, upon the banks
Of Beaverbrook, lone Angelique maintained
Her patient vigil, started to the door
With every coming footfall on the trail,
Caught her warm breath with every crackling
twig—
As, one by one, the frosted maple-blades,
Floating their bronze upon the wistful blue
Of smoldering autumn, eddied to the sod,

Banded their warmth against a long, long snow.
When the last leaf sank, and the maple-tree was
bare,
And never a thrush remained upon the bough,
Worn Angelique, grown desolate of hope,
Nursing a dream of cradleboard to come
And fearful of the thrust of village eyes,
Withdrew herself; secluded in a nook—
A cabin dark with rambling tanglewood—
Safe from the hiss and venom of village talk
That glided, snake-like, on her heels when she
Went forth in day, she gave herself to dreams,
Visions of loveliness to come, to-morrow. . . .

In St. Hilaire old Angelique abides,
Harried and bruised, a windfall for the world,
As any fallen fruit upon the ground,
Broken and pocked by the bills of many birds,
Under the foot of every passing woman,
Under the foot of every passing man.
In St. Hilaire the crone drags out her moons,
Companioned by the slender souvenir
Of a high sweet moment of romance, a seedling
Sprung from a dream gone into yesterday.
Oh, he is beautiful in the blue of moonlight.

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